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# The (Zen) Buddhist Heart of I ♥ Huckabees

## **Abstract**

This paper offers a Buddhist reading of *I ♥ Huckabees* (2004). I begin with an overview of director David O. Russell's Zen influence to reveal how he weaves the Buddhist metaphor of Indra's net (a metaphor for the doctrine of pratitya-samutpada) and the principles of meditation into the narrative. The main objective, however, is to demonstrate that Russell doesn't merely re-present Buddhist ideals but also attempts to "practice" Buddhism by using the visual vernacular of contemporary media culture to rework film as meditation and meditation as film. In weaving Buddhist ideals into his satire on contemporary culture, I argue that Russell is engaging us in religious and ethico-political reflection.

David O. Russell's *I ♥ Huckabees* (*I Heart Huckabees*) tells the story of Albert Markovski, poet and environmentalist who hires a husband and wife team of "existential detectives," Bernard and Vivian Jaffe, to explain a string of seemingly absurd coincidences in his life where he repeatedly encounters a mysterious "African guy." Together with peer-support buddy Tommy Corn, Albert's identity quickly unravels as the Jaffes encourage him to question the meaning of life and confront his rivalry with nemesis Brad Stand. Brad and his girlfriend Dawn also engage the Jaffes and begin to confront their own existential conundrums. The characters' existential crises unfold in a series of increasingly absurd events and come to a head when all but Brad experience epiphanies to gain insight into the nature of reality, self, compassion, joy and misery.

*Huckabees* bills itself as an "existential comedy" and its philosophical musing is less than subtle, if somewhat silly. The film is littered with footnotes and references to an array of philosophical and artistic/critical ideas, from Sartrean existentialism to psychoanalysis to surrealism. Reading the film from any one of these (secular) perspectives would certainly make for an interesting read. But as Donna Yarri notes in her review of the film, *Huckabees* also has distinctive religious undertones; the existential questions asked in the film are perennial religious ones.<sup>1</sup> Albert expresses this in no uncertain terms when he tells Vivian, "I want you to find out... about my life ... and about the whole thing, about the

universe, you know, the Big One." Russell, I argue, attempts to answer these questions from a Buddhist perspective. I will demonstrate that he is predominantly influenced by Zen. I will highlight how the film invokes the Buddhist doctrine of dependent origination (*pratitya-samutpada*) and principles of meditation before offering a close reading of a special effects sequence to demonstrate that Russell employs the visual vernacular of contemporary media culture to "practice" Buddhism, reworking film as meditation and meditation as film to engage us in ethico-political reflection. Zen, Indra's net, and 'interconnectivity.'

Russell has admitted that *Huckabees* is predominantly influenced by Zen. He first encountered Buddhist philosophy at college with Indo-Tibetan Buddhist scholar Robert Thurman. His exposure to Buddhist ideas at college inspired him to later spend several years living in a Zendo.<sup>2</sup> While Russell did not pursue Buddhism in the Tibetan tradition of Thurman, it appears that Thurman had nevertheless left a lasting impression on him. Russell mentioned in an interview that the character of Bernard Jaffe was modeled after Thurman. Bernard's philosophy of "universal interconnectivity," however, does not appear to be inspired by Tibetan Buddhism, rather it is distinctively Zen. In his first consultation with the Jaffes, Albert is shown the "blanket." Bernard puts his fist under and moves it across different parts of a plain white blanket, asking Albert to imagine that it represents something different, "You ... me ... Vivian ... the Eiffel Tower ... war ... a museum ... a disease ... an

orgasm ... a hamburger." He then tells Albert that these different things are not distinct from one another but are interrelated and "unified." This recalls the Buddhist metaphor of Indra's net, a central thematic of the Huayen school of China which D.T. Suzuki has characterized as quintessentially Zen.<sup>3</sup> Francis Cook translates the metaphor as such:

Far away in the heavenly abode of the great god Indra, there is a wonderful net which has been hung by some cunning artificer in such a manner that it stretches out infinitely in all directions. In accordance with the extravagant tastes of deities, the artificer has hung a single glittering jewel in each "eye" of the net, and since the net itself is infinite in dimension, the jewels are infinite in number. There hang the jewels, glittering like stars in the first magnitude, a wonderful sight to behold. If we now arbitrarily select one of these jewels for inspection and look closely at it, we will discover that in its polished surface there are reflected all the other jewels in the net, infinite in number. Not only that, but each of the jewels reflected in this one jewel is also reflecting all the other jewels, so that there is an infinite reflecting process occurring.<sup>4</sup>

The blanket clearly lacks the celestial trappings of Indra's net but the modest fabric nevertheless expresses the same wisdom. Cook describes the symbolism of Indra's net as the "infinitely repeated interrelationship of all the members of the cosmos."<sup>5</sup> Indra's net is a metaphor for the Buddhist doctrine of *pratitya-samutpada*, dependent origination or dependent co-arising: Because all beings, objects and phenomena are interwoven in a web of causality, there is no separate or intrinsic self. Rather, all beings and phenomena are not self-existent but co-constituted, interpenetrated, or as Bernard puts it, "interconnected." Bernard's blanket, his philosophy of "universal interconnectivity," expresses the wisdom of *pratitya-samutpada*. For Cook, Indra's

net implies that "there is no centre, or perhaps if there is one, it is everywhere."<sup>6</sup> Bernard echoes this when he impresses upon Albert the significance of the blanket: "The universe is an infinite sphere whose centre is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere." To realize this is to relinquish self-centeredness, which for Buddhism is the root of existential discontent. He even teaches Albert a method to realize the wisdom of the "blanket". Forgetting the self in meditation.

The method involves Albert lying in a body bag, which Bernard claims would "help shut down your everyday perceptions and give up your usual identity that you think separates you from everything." At this point, we enter Albert's consciousness to witness a relentless stream of random thoughts and macabre fantasies: the film segues into one of its many surreal moments as it cuts from images of the external world falling apart like jigsaw pieces to flashbacks of past events to disembodied talking heads abusing Albert.

The sheer bizarreness of the scene aside, it does capture the experience of Buddhist meditation. Russell mentioned that he wanted to debunk the popular (mis)conception of meditation as an esoteric or mystical practice. Meditation for him is to simply close one's eyes to "see what's going on in there."<sup>7</sup> Buddhist meditation aims at taming what is widely called the "monkey mind." Through meditation one turns attention inwards to see that the mind is always active, restless and full of thoughts. This is what Albert experiences when he climbs into the bag.

But the aim of meditation is not to forcibly suppress the mind. Rather, through sustained practice, one cultivates mindfulness or awareness to observe the mind with equanimity. In this equanimous space, the mind comes to rest on its own accord and the meditator begins to gain insight into its habitual tendencies. The meditator gains insight when conceptual projections, especially the fiction of the self, drops away. Vietnamese Zen teacher Thich Nhat Hanh teaches that "if we continue in our mindful observation there will no longer be a duality between observer and observed."<sup>8</sup> In the absence of the observer-observed duality there is only observation. In this space of pure observation, the meditator begins to understand the nature of bodily sensations, feelings, the mind and mental conceptions, experiencing them as impermanent, contingent, and without intrinsic essence, and hence, develops the wisdom of Indra's net.

Russell also references another form of mediation in Zen: koans. Koans are paradoxical questions or statements employed to enlighten the practitioner. A popular (if over-parodied) example is "What is the sound of one hand clapping?" Koans are believed to evoke an experience that is beyond rational thought. They work to keep the meditator in a contemplative state of perplexity in which a sudden realization might burst forth.<sup>9</sup> When Bernard and Vivian confront Brad with evidence of his inauthenticity he finally begins to unravel, retorting in exasperation, "How am I not myself?!" Rather than answer him, Bernard and Vivian repeat his

question almost like a mantra. Brad had unwittingly posed himself a koan, "How am I not myself?" This seemingly straightforward question tips him over the edge, as it were, into deep self-evaluation. The question repeats incessantly in his head as he wanders around in a daze, as if he had forgotten his own identity. But "how am I not myself" is not meant to elicit an answer. Rather, it functions as a koan to keep Brad in unknowingness so as to help him "forget himself." As Dogen has written in his *Shobogenzo* which contains some 300 koans: "To study the Buddha way is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self." The 'pure observation' of special effects. To study the self is to forget the self."<sup>10</sup>

### **The 'pure observation' of special effects**

*Huckabees* doesn't merely engage with Buddhist ideas at the narrative level. On the formal level, the film is punctuated with several special effects sequences which I will read as Russell's filmic "practice" of Buddhism - as his attempt to evoke meditative experience. The first of these sequences occur after Albert storms out of an argument at the Open Spaces office: Bernard asks Albert, "Tell me what's happening right now?" As Albert starts to explain himself Bernard tells him he isn't asking about what had just transpired but rather, "I'm talking about what's happening right now... I'm talking about the blanket; like this." At this moment, Bernard's right eye detaches itself from his face and starts to drift towards Albert. This is followed by the other parts of his face. His face is not torn apart as such:



from the viewer's perspective we still see the image of Bernard - we still see an actor standing before the camera. What we also see, however, are snapshots being "copied" and lifted from the master image as if we were watching a Photoshop process. The same thing happens to Albert. The snapshots of Bernard's features begin to "paste" themselves on Albert and the ones of Albert do the same to Bernard. Soon, snapshots from other parts of their bodies and the surroundings begin to detach themselves and intermingle in the space between them. This sequence, along with a similar one later in the film involving Tommy, expresses visually Bernard's Zen-inspired philosophy of "interconnectivity."

Russell evokes the experience of meditation through Bernard's question, "What is happening right now?" Both Albert and the viewer initially assume that he is asking about what had just transpired but he clarifies that what he meant is "this": this is the cue for special effects to begin and both the character and the viewer are taken by surprise. The effects are hardly state-of-the-art, but it is precisely its simplicity (and perhaps even amateurishness), coupled with Bernard's self-reflexive question and the sudden fade-in of music, that startles the viewer (and Albert) into wonderment. What is interesting about this special effects sequence is that the characters do not see the snapshots of themselves as physical objects in their world as if they were Polaroids levitating in diegetic space but as how the viewer sees them: two-dimensional computer generated thumbnails. This works to

disrupt the distinction between the diegetic and non-diegetic and to unsettle the opposition between the viewer (subject) and the film (object). It dawns upon us, quite surreptitiously, that the "now" Bernard speaks of does not refer to any specific moment in the film nor outside it; it does not refer to an objective moment in time but rather to the ever-present now, the non-teleological reality of Indra's net of which we (the viewers, the film, everything) are manifestations.

Granted, this moment is very brief and it doesn't take long for the viewer to get over the initial jolt created by the sudden display of special effects. But in this initial moment, the viewer and Albert are enjoined in the act of seeing. This act of seeing takes precedence over the seer (subject) and the seen (object) and indeed, becomes conscious of its own working: "The seeing is not reflecting on an object as if the seer had nothing to do with it. The seeing, on the contrary, brings the seer and the object seen together, not in mere identification but the becoming conscious of itself, or rather of its working."<sup>11</sup> This is D.T. Suzuki's description of the Zen concept of "no-mind" and can be pressed into service to explain the scene here. I argue that "no mind" is what Russell is attempting to evoke. Through the cinematic apparatus, he gives us a glimpse (literally) of what it might be like to "forget" ourselves, to experience the meditative state of pure observation, even if only for the briefest of moments. It is thus befitting that in the climactic moment of the film, Albert is jolted into "enlightenment" when he sees little snapshots of his own face

superimpose themselves over a photograph of Brad, and experiences a surge of compassion towards Brad to reconcile their differences. Film as meditation, meditation as film

### **Film as meditation, meditation as film**

Bhutanese filmmaker and Buddhist lama Khyentse Norbu has likened cinema to a modern-day thangkas, traditional Tibetan Buddhist scroll paintings used as visualization aids for meditation.<sup>12</sup> Norbu, however, doesn't further explain his comparison of the thangka to cinema. Although Russell is a Zen Buddhist I wonder if certain Tibetan Buddhist ideas (which he had encounter through Thurman in college) also work their way into his film. I believe we can extrapolate from Russell's filmic techniques to illustrate Norbu's point.

Russell said that he had deliberately avoided elaborate special effects to discourage audiences from slipping into what he calls a "cinematic vernacular", which he opines would make the audience "less likely to be startled or questioned".<sup>13</sup> It is likely that Russell is referring to the kind of engagement involved with the science fiction and fantasy genre which usually invites the audience to suspend a degree of belief.<sup>14</sup> But in any case, the audience of *Huckabees* is watching a movie; despite what he says, they are adopting cinematic vernacular. Hence, I would argue that Russell nevertheless draws on, and encourages us to

engage with what I would describe as a "screen vernacular". Because whether *Huckabees* features spectacular effects or not, it is a discourse of our "electronic culture of video and computer assisted imagery", one "based on principles of envelopment and temporal simultaneity rather than distance and sequential unfolding."<sup>15</sup> Media theorist Margaret Morse has examined the interrelationship between the screen and subjectivity in this context to suggest that the screen has become a "threshold" that is not so much an "entrance [as] a site of fascination where fantasy is invited or displaced."<sup>16</sup>

Morse made this argument in 1999. In the time since, we have witnessed the emergence of such devices as the iPhone and the iPad, with other similar touchscreen technologies looming on the horizon. These devices together with the reinvention of 3D cinema (heralded no doubt by James Cameron's *Avatar*) and the imminent arrival of 3D television, indicate that Morse's argument is more pertinent today than it was some ten years ago. For these recent technologies illustrate, perhaps more clearly than she had anticipated, the argument that the screen functions as a liminal space for "ontological play, a stepping, turning, and clicking on and off of fiction itself."<sup>17</sup> It is this possibility of the screen, I argue, that allows for a link between Tibetan visualization practices and cinema. With the aid of those special effects sequences—which draw the viewer's gaze to the surface of the screen and thereby blur the boundaries between diegetic and non-diegetic space—

*Huckabees* invites the audience to partake in an ontological play that many of us are already familiar with, but perhaps only intuitively.

Following my reading of the sequences above, it could be argued that the snapshots draw the viewer into the characters' world, making us part of the "fictional" world. But it could also be said that the snapshots draw the characters out to the viewer's world, making them part of our "real" world. It seems then that the characters and the viewer, the diegetic and non-diegetic, meet somewhere in the "middle," a space between the "fictional" and the "real"—might I even say a space that is neither fictional nor real? But what might this space be? Insofar as we may identify such a "space", it is the screen. It is on the screen—the threshold, a liminal space—where the special effects play out; it is on the screen where the viewer is invited to experience meditation, where the seer and the object seen meet in a moment of conscious seeing: of pure observation. Does this liminal space allow us to see through the fantasy of life and click on and off the great fiction of the self, which from a Buddhist perspective is the grandest (and most delusional) narrative of all? If so, *Huckabees* could very well have given us a glimpse of film as meditation and meditation as film. An invitation to ethico-political reflection

### **An invitation to ethico-political reflection**

Moreover, if the screen is indeed a liminal space where ontological play is possible, could it also be a space, a threshold, for a religious (non-dual) experience? I would indeed suggest that *Huckabees* is performing a certain filmic religious function, one which is closely linked to the ethical. Greg Watkins has explored how the cinematic apparatus establishes a relationship between the religious and the ethical. He suggests that films perform a certain religious function when they return the viewer's gaze. This, he posits, disrupts the sense of invisibility involved in watching film and complicates the distance between the viewer and the film and thus places ethical demands on the audience to engage with the issues represented.<sup>18</sup> I argue that the scenes I've examined above function in a similar manner. While they do not involve a character returning the audience's gaze, in making the act of looking conscious—in disrupting the distinction between the diegetic and non-diegetic—they are in effect returning the viewer's gaze and placing demands on them to reflect on the ethico-political issues represented.

The ethico-political elements in *Huckabees* are quite overt. Russell had admitted that Albert was modeled after his younger self as an activist and that whilst he no longer participates in this sort of activism he still holds the same beliefs, only now he expresses it through cinema.<sup>19</sup> *Huckabees*, I argue, articulates Russell's critique of a corporate-dominated, celebrity-obsessed culture. His satirical portrayal of contemporary culture is evident when we see Brad usurping leadership of Open

Spaces and turning its environmental cause into a publicity machine for the *Huckabees* corporation, complete with Shania Twain paraphernalia. A more pointed critique, however, is evident in the subplot involving the mysterious "African guy." It is through this subplot that *Huckabees* voices its ethico-political critique most strongly. Here, Russell articulates a Buddhist-inspired ethico-political outlook, one founded on non-duality and commitment to the twin ideals of wisdom and compassion.

Upon locating the "African guy", Albert and Tommy learn that his name is Steve and that he is a Sudanese orphan adopted by the Hootens, a middle-class Christian family. They are invited to share a meal with the family, and a heated conversation quickly ensues when Albert expresses his curiosity about the meaning of life. Albert's existential rumination puzzles the children who ask their mother why he doesn't turn to the church for guidance. "Sometimes people have additional questions to be answered," Mrs Hooten replies. When Albert mentions Open Spaces' aim of curbing suburban sprawl, Mr Hooten remarks sardonically, "Ask Steven, he could have used with a little suburban sprawl in Sudan ... industry, houses, jobs, restaurants, medicine, clothes, videos, toys, cheeseburgers, cars - a functioning economy." But when Albert tries to explain that he isn't against economic progress as such but rather, is campaigning for a more measured approach to "development", Mr Hooten loses his temper and accuses him of

advocating "socialism" and that "if development stops so does [his] paycheck." Tommy quickly joins in the fray and starts a tirade against petroleum, accusing Mr Hooten of being a "destroyer" (because he drives a fuel-guzzling SUV), to which he exclaims, "But God gave us oil! He gave it to us! How can God's gift be bad?!" The two of them are eventually chased out the door when Tommy derides the family's altruism and suggests that Jesus would be angry with them for failing to see America's involvement with foreign dictatorships.

To read this scene simply as anti-Christian would be quite facile. I argue that Russell's intention is not to ridicule Christianity but to point out the irony in how Mr Hooten, who clearly has good intentions, could nevertheless be blind to the implications of his political beliefs. If Russell is challenging fundamentalist beliefs here, I argue that it is not so much "religious" fundamentalism as "market" fundamentalism that is under critique. Mr Hooten can be said to be a proponent of the economic paradigm of "development", which sees rapid industrialization and the creation and expansion of consumerist economies as the solution to humanitarian problems. He is so entrenched in his belief in market capitalism that he cannot help but distort Albert's environmental cause as socialism. Likewise, he cannot comprehend Tommy's apprehension about the wider impacts of the petroleum industry and America's complicity in the global crises it grapples with. Admittedly, Albert and Tommy were unnecessarily strident if not outrightly



abusive. But their impatience with Mr Hooten clearly belies a concern about the negative consequences of unbridled capitalist expansion, consequences such as vast social inequalities and environmental degradation.

A rigid capitalist worldview, as Zen teacher and social critic David Loy suggests, treats human wellbeing primarily in terms of wealth/poverty and rationalizes the relentless pursuit of "development" and the need to "monetarize" the world no matter the cost. But this worldview is not self-evident nor is it inevitable. It is one "with ontology and ethics, in competition with other understandings of what the world is and how we should live in it."<sup>20</sup> Despite how it presents itself, market capitalism is not just about economic freedom, "rather, it is the ascendancy of one particular way of understanding and valuing the world that need not be taken for granted."<sup>21</sup> Russell appears to be keenly aware of this; he appears to have taken steps to avoid the kind of essentialism that characterizes the capitalist worldview. He said that he offers contradictory perspectives in the film in order to avoid a "God's-eye view" which is a "fabrication."<sup>22</sup> In the scene with the Hootens, Russell refuses to reconcile conflicting views and in doing so, draws attention to the internal contradictions of global capitalism and debunks market essentialism. The assumption that market expansion will inevitably bring "progress" is exposed as a fabrication. *Huckabees* therefore is a film that refuses to take global capitalism for granted, and indeed it suggests that when we take it for

granted we blind ourselves to its negative impacts: the suffering of others and environmental degradation. By interweaving these themes with meditative film techniques, *Huckabees* invites us narratively and visually to not only meditative contemplation but also ethico-political reflection.

### Conclusion

This paper has explicated the Buddhist, and particularly, Zen elements in *Huckabees*. My reading of the film demonstrates that director Russell is not content with merely representing Buddhist teachings but has even attempted to work those teachings into the act of viewing itself. By situating the special effects sequences of the film in the context of contemporary media culture - in which the screen has become a liminal space for ontological play - I argued that Russell reworks film as meditation and meditation as film. In this manner, *Huckabees* invites us to religious and ethico-political reflection. Its satirical crosshair is aimed at such issues as corporate totalization and environmental degradation. To this extent, the film is aligned with socially-engaged Buddhist movements that are challenging the ontology and ethics of global capitalism.

*Huckabees*, however, doesn't prescribe any sweeping solutions even as it challenges global capitalism - in fact, those who make such suggestions in the film are ridiculed, like Mr Hooten and Tommy. What it does offer is a more modest and

perhaps more holistic suggestion. The film suggests that social engagement is most effective when it derives from wisdom and compassion, when we are able to touch the non-duality of self and others. Rather than make grand statements, Russell refracts pressing socio-political issues through the characters' journeys of self-discovery and addresses them at the level of everyday conundrums: Albert learns to harness true activism by coming to terms with his personal neurosis and overcoming pride; Tommy relinquishes his nihilistic views to learn that social conscience begins with the simplicity of loving and caring for another; Dawn learns self-acceptance by seeing through the facade of the celebrity cult of fame and beauty; and Brad takes the biggest tumble of them all by having the callousness of his corporate obsession revealed to him. The stories of these characters affirm what Buddhism teaches, that transformation begins when we bring non-grasping attentiveness to our everyday experience. So if *Huckabees* offers an ethico-political statement it is a Mahayana-inspired one: awaken ourselves so that we might awaken the world.

The ♥ in *I ♥ Huckabees*, then, can be read as a clever branding device, a parody of our corporate-dominated, celebrity obsessed culture of brand logos.<sup>23</sup> But given its religious themes, perhaps it also alludes to the "heart" of Mahayana Buddhism, which does not distinguish between the heart and the mind but emphasizes the heart-mind instead. It is the heart-mind that cultivates bodhicitta,

the quality of loving-kindness and compassion that brings one towards bodhisattvahood. Perhaps, ♥ bespeaks a love that the word itself fails to capture. If so, the invitation in *I ♥ Huckabees* is for us to ♥ the world anew, with selfless wisdom and compassion.

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<sup>1</sup> Donna Yarri, "I ♥ *Huckabees*" (Film Review), *Journal of Film and Religion* 10, no.1 (2006), <http://www.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol10no1/Reviews/Huckabees.htm>, (28 November 2008).

<sup>2</sup> Russell quoted in Gavin Smith, "Hearts and Minds," *Film Comment* 40, no. 5 (2004), 31.

<sup>3</sup> D.T. Suzuki quoted in David Loy, "Indra's Postmodern Net," *Philosophy East and West* 43, no. 3 (1993), 483.

<sup>4</sup> Francis H. Cook, *Hua-yen Buddhism: The Jewel Net of Indra* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1977), 2.

<sup>5</sup> Cook, 2.

<sup>6</sup> Cook, 2.

<sup>7</sup> Russell quoted in Smith, 33.

<sup>8</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *Transformation and Healing: Sūtra on the Four Establishments of Mindfulness* (California: Parallax, 1990), 126.

<sup>9</sup> D.T. Suzuki, *Zen Buddhism: Selected Writings of D.T. Suzuki*, edited by William Barrett (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1956), 134-154.

<sup>10</sup> Dogen quoted in David Loy, *The Great Awakening: A Buddhist Social Theory* (Boston: Wisdom, 2003), 183.

<sup>11</sup> Suzuki, 160.

<sup>12</sup> Norbu quoted in Susan Jake and Chendebji, "The God of Small Film," in *Time Magazine Online*, 27 January 2003, <<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,411452->

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2,00.html>, (4 December 2007). Norbu, whose religious title is Dzongar Jamyang Khyentse Rinpoche, is recognized as a tulku (reincarnation of a high lama) of the Khyentse lineage of Tibetan Buddhism. Like many contemporary Buddhists, he is eager to take Buddhism beyond its traditional confines to rearticulate it afresh for contemporary audiences. He is noted for his films, *The Cup* (1999) and *Travellers and Magicians* (2003).

<sup>13</sup> A point should be made here about special effects which tend to be disparaged as mere “eye candy”, as if they have little significance for the narrative. This is especially so if they are highly elaborate and spectacular, like those in science fiction films. While it is true that special effects often disrupt narrative flow to draw attention to themselves, Vivian Sobchack has argued that they serve to evoke affective response, from “joyous intensities” to “euphoria” to the “sublime”, the very qualities any story would seek to evoke; see Vivian Sobchack, *Screening Space: The American Science Fiction Film* (New York: Ungar, 1987), 282-283. I have borrowed ideas about special effects from studies on science fiction cinema; I believe the insights revealed about visual effects in these studies can be transposed to the example here and to cinema more generally. See also, Annette Kuhn, “Spectators: Introduction,” *Alien Zone: Cultural Theory and Contemporary Science Fiction Cinema*, ed. Annette Kuhn (New York: Verso, 1990), 145-151.

<sup>14</sup> Russell quoted in Smith, 32. For reasons mentioned above, I do not agree with Russell that spectacular effects necessarily make it less likely for the viewer to be as startled or questioned. However, I agree that simple effects, rather than the spectacular kinds found in the sci-fi genre, are more evocative in this instance.

<sup>15</sup> Margaret Morse, “Body and Screen,” *Wide Angle* 21, no.1 (1999), 64.

<sup>16</sup> Morse, 64.

<sup>17</sup> Morse, 64.

<sup>18</sup> Greg Watkins, “Seeing and Being Seen: Distinctive Filmic and Religious Elements in Film,” *Journal of Film and Religion* 3, no.2 (1999), <http://www.unomaha.edu/jrf/watkins.htm>, (2 December 2008).

<sup>19</sup> Russell quoted in Smith, 31. His previous film *Three Kings* (1999), for example, interrogates the legacy of the first Gulf War.

<sup>20</sup> David Loy, “Religion of the Market,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 65, no.2 (1997), 277.

<sup>21</sup> Loy, “Religion of the Market,” 277-278.

<sup>22</sup> Russell quoted in Smith, 31.

<sup>23</sup> See Naomi Klein, *No Logo: Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies* (London: Flamingo, 2000).